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Americans may be focused on domestic problems, but the need continues for a strong national defense in the post-Cold War era -- and that defense must address both modernization and morale issues.

Volume 13 Number 31

U.S. Must Plan Carefully For Strong Future Defense

Remarks by John J. Hamre, deputy secretary of defense, at the Navy League Sea-Air-Space Exposition, Washington, March 31, 1998, and at the christening of the fast combat-support ship USS Bridge, San Diego, March 28, 1998.

Thank you. ... I thought, not to turn you all off, that I would share with you some of the private observations that at least have been growing in my mind the last several months, as we go through this year, and perhaps discuss them in a broader implication, because I'll be honest, I'm worried. I'm concerned.

This weekend, my wife and I, we had a wonderful opportunity. My wife was asked to be the sponsor of the USS Bridge [see text that follows this speech]. We were out in San Diego and had a wonderful time. We were able to christen the Bridge. It was a deceiving day in San Diego. It was 50 degrees and the wind was blowing 30 miles an hour, and it was raining like crazy. I was convinced it's what the chamber of commerce in San Diego does to make sure more people from Washington don't move there.

While we were enduring the weather and enjoying the ceremony, I thought to myself, in one sense, this became a kind of a typical vignette for my personal sense of what's going on right now. ... The pier was full of sailors and their families who were there to dedicate the ship, be part of it. There were maybe a hundred or so former Navy personnel, a significant number from the first USS Bridge that was inactivated in 1947. And then there were maybe 15 civilians from the greater San Diego area. It isn't that they're not patriotic. I think a lot of it really has to do with the weather. It was really kind of a crummy day, and people didn't really want to come out.

I understand that, but I fear it speaks to a larger reality that's going on in our country right now, and that is that America is taking its military for granted. It isn't thinking about it anymore. We're not aware of what this military is doing, and to far too many Americans, it is a remote activity in some distant land.

I worry about that. I worry about that a great deal.

I was also struck at the time that we were christening the Bridge at how the time juxtaposition between my brief tenure in this office -- I've been in the job now about six months, I don't know how long I'll have a chance to stay -- but to know that that ship which my wife was able to christen really had been started and planned 15 years ago. I think the dollars were appropriated for it nine years ago. It was being delivered today. It will go into the fleet in six months or so and it will serve for the next 30 years.

I was struck by my personal responsibilities and stewardship while I have this job. My responsibility is to persevere, try to do the right thing, keep momentum going in the midst of a country right now that doesn't want to think about it. I think that's an unusual challenge for all of us, and that's really what I would like to talk with you about today.

This morning, I was with the secretary when we met with one of the committees in the Congress and we were talking about our defense program. We went around the table as you do in these sorts of things, and people said, well, I think you guys aren't spending enough attention to X, Y, Z, and I think you've cut your force structure too much, and I think you've done this and you aren't paying enough attention to

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that.

The secretary heard everybody out, and then he said, OK, I hear what you say, but do you know that right now the budget committee is trying to cut the defense budget by \$3.5 billion?

Yeah, that's a real problem. You know, it's kind of a comment. Yeah, you're damn right it's a real problem. You know, I mean, everybody has ideas of what we ought to do. I welcome that. I think we need as many brains at the table as we can get. But we seem to have a desire for a much larger military than we're prepared to pay for right now.

There was a poll that was taken about a month and a half ago asking Americans if there is a balanced budget and there is a surplus in fiscal year 98, where do you think we ought to spend the money? [Of the people polled, only 1 percent] thought we ought to spend the additional funds on defense.

So we have, I think, a very unusual and very important challenge. We have a challenge that is much bigger than just today's commitment to a program. ... In many ways, it's the way that the church kept knowledge alive during the Dark Ages. Somebody was there preserving the past in order to inform our future.

Somebody now has to be thinking about why we need a strong military at a time when most Americans aren't thinking about it. I mean, if you were to go to your average American and say it's a dangerous world out there, they're not thinking about Kosovo. They're thinking about their kids trying to get to school ...without [having to dodge] drug dealers, or they're thinking about gangs in the inner city. They're not thinking about the bigger picture.

So we have, I think, an unusual obligation. I say that intentionally. It's an obligation. I think we have an unusual obligation as citizens who are committed to a strong national defense to start speaking openly to our fellow citizens, who really right now would be just as happy to forget about it. I mean, if we're not going to talk about it, who is?

That's why I came today. I didn't come just to see all you great guys. I can see you almost any time. But I came here to ask for your help. I can sit in my office and I can't see a tenth of the people in a year that frankly, all of you are going to see in the next week.

You need to be taking a message on behalf of the secretary. You need to take a message on behalf of this department. We have some unusual challenges ahead and Americans need to worry about their defense. I mean, I hope if we worry about it now, we don't have a crisis to preoccupy us in 10 years. But we could if we don't think about it now and if we don't plan now -- if we don't think about laying a keel for a USS Bridge that shows up 10 years from now.

And that's why the Navy League is so important. If it isn't you, who? If it isn't you that's going to be talking to fellow citizens, who is? If it isn't you who are going to be talking to members of Congress and members of the administration, who else? So you have a particularly important role right now, an unusually important role, and that is to help keep, I think, conserve the memory of why it is that we need a strong military.

It's an unusual challenge at a time when, as I said, most Americans don't need to think about it and don't think they need to think about it. We're the only superpower in the world, so people say, well, that's OK.

We're the most unusual superpower in the world, not because we build ships like the Bridge, not because we put in the field the finest army in the world or build the best fighters and put them into the hands of our air force. We are the world's only superpower and a unique superpower because we're the only country, superpower, in the world that seeks nobody else's land except the ground it takes to bury our own dead.

There's not another country in the world that has that kind of a reputation, and it brings with it unusual responsibilities -- really unusual responsibilities and challenges. There are some who say we don't need

to be the policeman to the world. I agree with that. I agree with that. But our interests are inextricably tied to the gradual and peaceful evolution of a stable international environment. That's really why we're in Bosnia.

We're there so that we don't have yet another explosion in Europe that forces us to leave yet another 30,000 or 40,000 graves on the green hills of Normandy. Stop it before it happens. That's why we're there.

That's why we're there in the Persian Gulf, and our folks are tired. I was out there in Thanksgiving and they were tight then. Imagine staying tight for three months. They're tired, but they're ready. They'll be ready if they have to, still trying to confront this quarrelsome tyrant that frankly is prepared to gas his own population, let alone neighbors.

We can't get weary now. Just because the rest of the world would like this problem to go away doesn't mean this problem goes away. It's unusual, but we have to be the ones that stay vigilant for others right now, as hard as that is.

We can't forget that we have on-going responsibilities in a faraway place like Korea. Korea is still a very dangerous place, and we can't get weary now. We can't let down our guard now just because we're tired.

I think the secretary is confronting unusual challenges as was his predecessor, Dr. [William J.] Perry. All of us would like to have a bigger force. We would like to have newer facilities. We would like to have more ships. And we're trying to strike a balance ... at a time when, frankly, we're not going to be given more money.

We have the best of all worlds right now. We have a balanced budget. And that balanced budget -- think of the deficits over the last 13 years [that were the reason DoD's] budget has been cut for 13 years in a row. Thank goodness we now have that behind us.

The bad news is, people don't particularly think they need to worry about it. So we have to do our best to hold on to the resources that we're going to be given that have been locked into the budget resolution.

Now, inside of that, I think it's the secretary's view that we've cut our forces just about as far as we dare. They're out there right now working harder than they ever have. You all know that. I mean, they're darn tired.

Deployments are long. We are now tracking down to individual units to make sure who's getting close to the 120-day mark being out. About 10 percent of our force right now exceeds it. People are very tired. People are voting with their feet. Pilots are leaving in record numbers.

These are very tough times. We can't afford to get any smaller. We can't afford to lose what I think is the single quality that distinguishes the American military, and that's its daily readiness. When the problem came up in October, when Saddam Hussein kicked out the U.N. inspectors, this is the only military in the world [that,] within a month, is able to project a force of putting 400 aircraft on the ground and 500 cruise missiles and 30,000 people -- do it all flawlessly.

That takes on-going readiness. That takes an investment every day, and you can't cut that back. It's astounding what we would lose if we did. After all, it takes a lot longer to build a command sergeant major than it does to build a destroyer. And you could lose it so easy if they get the sense that this is an outfit in decay. So we've got to pay attention to that.

Where we have cut back over the last eight years, frankly, has been in procurement. You all know that. It's darn thin.

I remember when I first started working for the Senate Armed Services Committee back in 1985. That year, we bought 943 combat aircraft. I don't think we have that many in our five-year plan. That isn't enough to sustain this force 10 years from now -- or 15 years from now.

We're buying what? Six ships this year? Seven ships? I mean, if they all last 30 years, that doesn't add up to a 300-ship Navy. So we have got to get back on the production curve. We've got to start producing things again.

So how are we going to do that with the dollars fixed, [and] the end strength, the force structure, ... as small as we can let it go? We can't afford to cut back on readiness and we need to get procurement up. We have to slim down. We have to cut infrastructure.

This is a dangerous town to say you're going to close bases, I'll tell you. But that's the reality, isn't it? I mean, we can't afford to keep bases around that we don't need and in order to do that, cut forces that we do [need]. We've got to turn that around. If we're going to hold on to the forces that we absolutely have to have in the future, we've got to slim down and cut back our infrastructure today. That's a tough message in this town, but I need you to be aware of it, and I need you to be sharing that message.

We cannot, we cannot sacrifice our fighting capability 15 years from now just because it's inconvenient to make hard choices on installations today. That's everybody's message, ... and we really do need your help on that.

As I said at the beginning, I worry ... where we're heading, as it were: the lack of thought and attention that we're devoting to what I think is an enormously important subject, which is our national security 10 years from now.

We're OK for right now. We'll be OK for the next four or five years. But I'm very worried about what it's going to be like in the long run. Part of it is money, but the bigger part is a lack of interest and a lack of attention to what's important.

This is a huge, marvelous organization that's been built up through lots of people's determination and sweat and tears and resources over the last 30, 40 years. We can't let that decay on our watch. That's why I have to ask for your help.

You have to be the voice on behalf of all of us in the Defense Department who are interested in national security. You have to be our voice, speaking to other Americans and tell[ing] them how important it is that we not lose the bedrock of our national security right now -- a strong and vibrant and creative department.

I'm encouraged in two dimensions. I'm encouraged, first of all, by the remarkable personnel we're still able to draw into this military. And I'm encouraged that there are still people like you who are willing to come to events like this. Sure, you've got a personal interest in it. Sure, it's part of your profession. But there isn't a person here who's doing it just for money. It's because you believe in it.

I ask myself frequently where are we going to get impressive young men like [those who] stood before us here in [the opening ceremony] color guard? Where are we going to get them 15 years from now? There's only one place, and that is the kids today who are walking around who see role models like them and like you, who are going to put into their minds a desire to be something big, be part of something grand. You have unusual responsibilities, as do we. In that regard, I'm very encouraged, ultimately hopeful, this great and sweet land is going to make it through all this, because people like you are committed and dedicated to doing it. ...

U.S. Strength and Staying Power Depend on All Who Serve

I welcome all of you. I must say, I am the price you all have to pay in order to get my wife to be the sponsor of this vessel. I am very pleased to be here today. I am honored to be with you on this christening day for USS Bridge.

In a few moments this mighty ship will be christened and begin to come to life, thanks to the vision and

commitment of the leaders of this country, to the skill and the ingenuity of the workers here at NASSCO [National Steel and Shipbuilding Co.] -- and I will say more about that later -- and the determination of a country that knows its freedom and prosperity depend on a steady vigilance.

We mark this day in a time of uneasy calm. The events of the past four months remind us again that we live in perilous times. On this day -- at this very hour -- American sailors and ships steadily patrol the waters of the Persian Gulf, prepared to enforce the international sanctions directed by the United Nations against a dangerous and quarrelsome Iraq.

American soldiers this hour bring peace to a scarred Bosnia, permitting children to experience a safety that we all enjoy and too often ignore here in United States.

Marines this hour stand watch in Guantanamo, quietly maintaining an outpost of freedom in a still captive land.

Airmen this day fly missions in every time zone, guarding and supplying our forces in distant lands.

America stands today as the world's only superpower. What makes us unique, however, is not our unmatched military strength. What sets us apart is the fact that America is the world's only power that claims no foreign soil except that needed to bury its fallen heroes who lived and died so that others might be free.

This great ship thus embodies our hopes and aspirations, not to conquer foreign lands, but to ensure that our people and people in every other country might live in peace and gain in prosperity.

I salute this day all those who helped bring forth the USS Bridge.

We congratulate the Navy for its foresight and determination to bring to the fleet this powerful new combat supply ship.

We congratulate the men and women of National Steel and Shipbuilding Co. who built this magnificent ship. We know the pride and the joy and the patriotism you feel this day. Over these last 10 years of struggle it has been remarkable what you have accomplished, and we salute you for that.

We congratulate the city of San Diego and celebrate the long and rich partnership between the Navy and this Navy town.

We congratulate the crew of USS Bridge that has worked so hard to see this day arrive.

The Bridge will join the fleet as one of the Navy's largest, fastest and best-equipped combat logistics ships. She well deserves the name Bridge, and will continue the legacy established by her namesake, Horatio Bridge, who was a pioneer in naval logistics.

Horatio Bridge revolutionized naval logistics. Under his stewardship during the Civil War, the Navy developed a comprehensive system for tactical resupply of warships at sea that to this day sets it apart from all other navies in the world.

As everyone knows, this is the second naval warship to carry the name Bridge. The first USS Bridge served our country honorably for over 30 years earlier in this century. We are honored to have several crew members from the first USS Bridge here with us today. And I would ask, would you please stand so all of us may thank you for your service to this country?

As we christen this ship today, no one should mistake the importance of this event.

The popular imagination of the Navy is filled with images of fighter pilots who are catapulted off carriers or cruise missiles launched from destroyers or submarines. But the true strength of the Navy lies in its quiet, determined vigilance in peacetime. America's diplomacy depends on this quiet, persistent

vigilance. That vigilance, the staying power of our forward-deployed forces, depends singularly on our supply forces, and ships like USS Bridge.

To you, crew members of USS Bridge, let no one suggest to you that your mission is secondary. America's Navy would wither in days without you, and this brings an enormous responsibility on your shoulders. You must succeed. You must excel.

On this day of celebration, you, the crew of the Bridge, I know feel joy and pride. In months and years to come this joy will be replaced by other emotions. I suspect that there will be days and nights when your hearts will be heavy with loneliness. Far from home and months away from family and friends, you will be tested. There will be days when you will question yourself and ask why have you chosen this life.

I do not know why it's happened to you, but I do know that something in you sets you apart from your fellow Americans. You have chosen a different path -- a life of service. You have chosen to become part of something big and grand and important. While others in your home towns spend their days working at the local mall or flipping burgers in a local fast-food shop, you spend your days defending the United States of America. You have committed yourselves to ideas that are at once ancient and yet fresh -- peace, freedom, liberty and opportunity.

In those lonesome hours that lie ahead, remind yourselves that America's liberty depends on you.

And this day, I am given the honor to speak on behalf of Americans to say to all of you, crewmen of the Bridge, and all of you who serve in this Navy and in other services, thank you.

Thank you from all Americans, who this night will sleep safely because of your commitment. Thank you for all future generations who will see this day your example and choose in their lives a life of service.

My deepest appreciation and sincerest thank you for the life that you've chosen to live. May God watch over you, and may God watch over this sweet land of liberty.

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DEFENSE ISSUES

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